

Koh-i-Noor changing hands



Vanit Nalwa

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How the famed Koh-i-Noor kept changing hands

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is the only owner of the Koh-i-Noor who earned the gem honourably and then wished to donate it to a shrine not of his faith



A fleeting glimpse of the Koh-i-Noor in the Tower of London requires a hefty entry fee. AP



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IN 1739, when Nadir Shah of Persia (Iran) looted the diamond from the Mughal king in Delhi, over two lakh people were said to have been slaughtered. The Afghans became the owners of the Koh-i-Noor when Ahmed Shah Abdali, Nadir's bodyguard, removed it from his master's tent

following the leader's assassination. The story of the Koh-i-Noor, a diamond mined in India, is not all gore and blood. It has an element of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's benevolence, long overlooked.

In Afghanistan, by the turn of the 18th century, Ahmed Shah Abdali, the persecutor of the Sikhs, was long dead. His grandsons, claimants to the throne, commenced a round robin of blinding and ousting. In 1809, Shah Mahmud expelled his brother Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk from Kabul. Shuja departed with 600 wives, numerous retainers, and a cache of jewels, including the Koh-i-Noor.

Shah Shuja sent his family to the Sikh empire while he headed towards Attock, a territory under Afghan control. The horrendous torment inflicted by the Afghans on the Sikhs gave the latter every reason to kill and plunder their oppressors, as was the norm, but the Sikhs did not indulge in wanton violence.



The governor of Attock and his brother, the governor of Kashmir, had rebelled against Shah Mahmud. Shah Shuja assumed that they would assist him. Instead, in an attempt to extract the Koh-i-Noor, Shuja was imprisoned first in Attock

and then in Kashmir. Fearing for her husband's life, Shah Shuja's favourite wife, Wafa Begum, pledged the Koh-i-Noor to Ranjit Singh for rescuing her husband from Kashmir.

Shah Mahmud ordered his army to march to Kashmir to punish the rebellious governor. The path to Kashmir lay through the Sikh empire, which forced the Afghans to seek Ranjit Singh's cooperation. The Sikhs and Afghans agreed to march jointly to Kashmir and share the booty. Shah Mahmud's army, led by Fateh Khan Barakzai, retook control of Kashmir but refused to share the spoils with the Sikhs.

The Sikh army, the Khalsaji, under Diwan Mohkam Chand, rescued and escorted Shah Shuja from Kashmir to Lahore, the capital of the Sikh empire. Ranjit Singh told Wafa Begum to honour her pledge, but the Shah employed tactics to avoid parting with the gem.

First, Shah Shuja unsuccessfully tried to convince Ranjit Singh that the gem was pawned in Kandahar. Then Shuja attempted to pass a large topaz as the Koh-i-Noor. On discovering that the

Shah was fooling him, Ranjit Singh put him under house arrest. Finally, the Maharaja offered Shah Shuja three lakhs and a jagir worth Rs 50,000 in exchange for the Koh-i-Noor (when the cost of a 10-gram gold coin was Rs 15). In response, Shuja requested a grace period of 50 days, hoping it would suffice to execute Plan C. Had Shuja's strategy succeeded, Ranjit Singh would not have been alive to take possession of the gem.



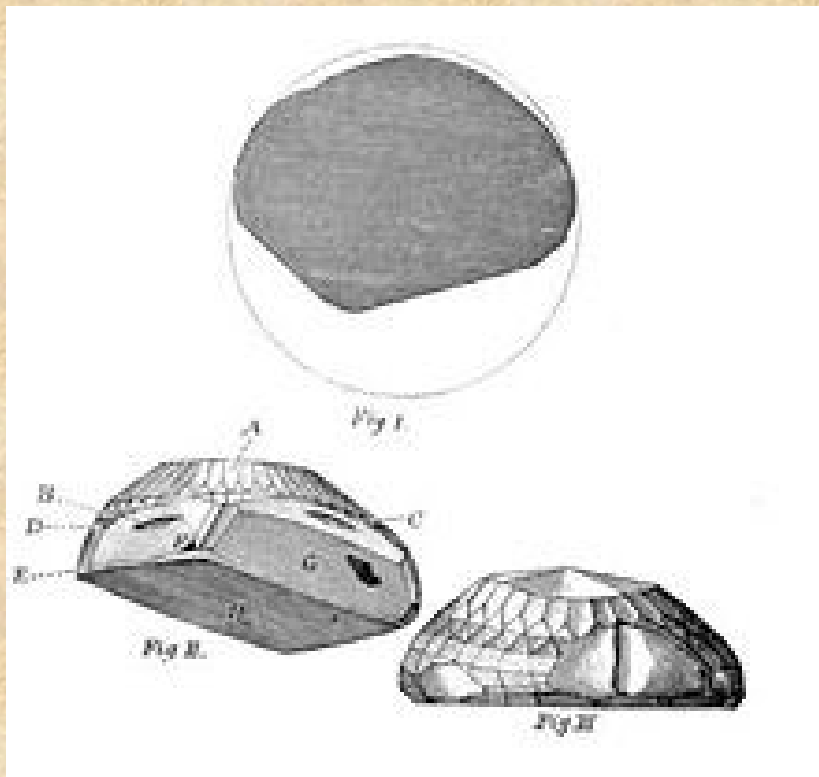


The Sikhs had decided to block Fateh Khan's passage on his return from Kashmir at Attock. Shah Shuja knew of this. The East India Company's records reveal that when the Khalsaji was engaged at the Attock frontier, Ranjit Singh's perfidious guest made mysterious overtures to the Company 'for the extirpation of the Sikhs from the Punjab'.

The Company received copies of letters allegedly written from Lahore by Shah Shuja to Fateh Khan Barakzai, asking to be rescued. The letters confirmed that under Fateh Khan's instructions, Shuja had recruited 500 Hindustanis, and if given more money, he could engage another three to four thousand men. It would be easy to kill Ranjit Singh, as he often rode out with just a few attendants, and to capture Lahore. Shuja was confident that the Khalsaji would disperse when it heard the news of the capture of Lahore and the murder of their king. Unfortunately for Shah Shuja, neither the Company nor Shah Mahmud took the bait.

On June 7, 1813, after the expiry of the grace period, the exiled Afghan king grudgingly

surrendered the Koh-i-Noor diamond to Maharaja Ranjit Singh.



Shah Shuja's conspiracy came to light in Lahore later. Pir Bakhsh, the Kotwal, investigated the matter. Hari Singh Nalwa, the rising star of the

Khalsaji, brought Shah Shuja and his Qazi before Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja asked the conspirators what punishment would befit a guest who behaved treacherously towards his host. Shah Shuja absolved himself of involvement and acknowledged that his men had committed a crime. "If left to me," said Shuja, "I would instantly hang the conspirators." Ranjit Singh merely imprisoned Shah Shuja's men, and two months later, the Shah stood surety and obtained their release.

Ranjit Singh's possession of the Koh-i-Noor lent the gem fame and visibility. The Maharaja wore it on state occasions, either as a sirpech or a bazuband. He also decorated Laili, his favourite horse, with the Koh-i-Noor. After Ranjit Singh's demise, the British took possession of the gem from his 10-year-old son and gifted it to Queen Victoria. A fleeting glimpse of the Koh-i-Noor in the Tower of London requires a hefty entry fee.

Indians believe that the sizeable diamond that came to be called the Koh-i-Noor in the 18th century once belonged to Lord Krishna. In 1839, on his deathbed, the Sikh monarch wished that his

'talismanic pledge of power', the Koh-i-Noor, be donated to the Krishna temple of Jagannath Puri in Odisha.

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